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Steven G. Marks. The Information Nexus: Global Capitalism from the Renaissance to the Present.

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his book remains very selective in its coverage. For example, while a certain kind of leftist might feel melancholy in the face of communism's defeat, there is a long and philosophically rich left-wing tradition that did not succumb to melancholy. Anarchism, which surfaces periodically in the book, has a different arc than communism. It bears mention that, contrary to Traverso's tendency to move seamlessly among the various historical currents of leftism, from the time of the First International onward, Marxists and communists did their best to suppress anarchist struggle in both memory and actuality. Today, anarchism holds a more powerful allure than communism and generates enthusiasm among militants, even if it also acknowledges defeats. Then, too, there are multiple currents of post-Marxism, which have theorized radical democracy as an alternative to the millenarian dream of revolution and have truly tried to move beyond the determinism that clings to Marxist theory in order to reconceive history as open and indeterminate. This is a tradition I have addressed in *Adventures of the Symbolic: Post-Marxism and Radical Democracy* (2013).

Insofar as Traverso appears to endorse the notion that "communism needs to be rethought and rebuilt" (99), without, of course, in any way indulging in nostalgia for really existing socialism, it is surprising that he is silent on current champions of precisely this project, figures such as Slavoj Žižek, Alain Badiou, or Traverso's colleague at Cornell University, Bruno Bosteels. Instead, Traverso revisits the heavily trodden terrain of Adorno and Benjamin, as if these figures are really the most relevant guides to the Left's present perplexity. Even in ending the book with Daniel Bensaïd, who died in 2010, Traverso accentuates Bensaïd's flirtations with the melancholic messianism of Benjamin but remains silent on Bensaïd's embrace of the new social movements, rejection of the dichotomy between reform and revolution, and willingness to consider the strategy of forming broad party coalitions on the Left. Traverso may be right that melancholy need not only be a paralyzing and even conservative force. After all, to put it in classic Freudian terms, the refusal or inability to move beyond melancholy might express a certain kind of resistance, an obstinate refusal to accept defeat. Yet to leave the twenty-first-century Left under the sign of Saturn neglects the efforts, past and present, to return the Left to the orbit of Mars.

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STEVEN G. MARKS. *The Information Nexus: Global Capitalism from the Renaissance to the Present*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016. Pp. xiv, 250. \$27.99.

The history of capitalism as a field of study suffers from the problem that "capitalism" has no agreed-upon definition. Steven G. Marks's book *The Information Nexus: Global Capitalism from the Renaissance to the Present* aspires to provide a remedy. In a brief compass, the author makes a refreshingly old-fashioned distinction between capitalism as rhetoric, or rhetorical weapon, and capitalism as tangible reality. He defines that real, existing capi-

talism by its essential characteristics and defends it against its chief rivals. And, as the book's subtitle promises, he seeks to provide a definition with global reach, shorn of Eurocentric blinders.

The book's shorter first part reviews the nineteenth-century origins of the term and the definitions offered by early socialists and social scientists, especially Max Weber, Werner Sombart, and Joseph Schumpeter. Marks then follows capitalism's rhetorical fate into the twentieth century, as it was recruited for service in the Cold War. In the course of his review, Marks dismisses substantive definitions of capitalism that emphasize capital accumulation, wage labor, commodification, private property, the division of labor, and the dominance of market relations. This discussion is too brief and selective to be entirely convincing, but it allows Marks to clear a path for his preferred definition. Market economies are nearly universal, he argues, but something entirely new and essential was added in early modern Europe, or, actually, in seventeenth-century Northwestern Europe: a market economy embedded within an information nexus. The book's longer second part traces the development of this information nexus through its early modern European commercial origins, its nineteenth-century industrial expansion, and its recent digital and global incarnation.

The centrality of information in the broadest sense of the word to innovation and to economic efficiency is no longer a novel claim, but this book makes a fast-paced, abundantly annotated case for it that is accessible to history students and general readers. To keep such readers engaged, Marks makes frequent allusions to contemporary concerns, freely offering his opinions on a broad range of issues.

*The Information Nexus* is a book with appeal, but it has two notable weaknesses: one theoretical, the other historical. Marks does not dwell sufficiently on what it took—and takes—to achieve an information-rich environment. Briefly stated, the challenge is to convert information, which usually begins as a private good, into a public good and to convert a mass of undigested information into "useful knowledge." Information is not costless. Its supply depends in large part on the search efforts of those who appreciate its potential value, while its social value is much enhanced when it is able to circulate freely among all social strata. Reconciling this contradiction requires institutions that are hard to achieve and harder to preserve. Moreover, while these institutions and practices may take root first in the commercial world, they cannot be confined to this realm. In time, they will affect science, religion, culture, and politics as well. Marks's account, by focusing mostly on the supply of commercial information, and by viewing its rising abundance primarily as a straightforward product of technology and state policy, makes the achievement rather less remarkable than it really was. His choices also handicap his later account of its historical development.

His historical account of the origins of the information nexus is fairly conventional. Marks does not seriously amend accounts of capitalism that have been with us since Weber: merchants in their towns developed a cor-

porate sense and acquired an institutionalized voice; Europe's fragmented political system was unable to control the flow of information; once the Dutch Republic, followed by England, established information-friendly political regimes, true capitalism was up and running. Even if we agree that no better explanation is yet possible, this account does not penetrate the interstices, as it were, of the information nexus. It remains a black box.

As Marks turns to the information nexus during the nineteenth-century rise of industrial capitalism, his story becomes less surefooted. In this new world of the telegraph, railroads, multidivisional firms, and mass marketing, it is no longer clear whether information was the catalyst of change or the end product. Nor is it clear whether the information nexus was becoming more accessible or more privatized, more exclusively held by those at the peaks of corporate and imperial hierarchies.

These puzzles continue as Marks moves on to the contemporary scene. Today, we supposedly live in a "flat world" of costless communication. Indeed, the current IT revolution has done much to democratize access to information, but it has simultaneously done much to concentrate income, wealth, and, hence, potential control over information flows. The achievement of an "open access order" is not a once-and-for-all thing.

Marks is certainly aware of this issue, and he addresses it directly, but in my view unsatisfactorily. Toward the end of the book, he raises a pressing contemporary question: Does China's economy count as capitalist? He concludes that it does not, since China supervises and limits the flows of information. It is therefore doubly surprising to read, in the conclusion of this quick-paced review of capitalism from its beginnings in the Dutch port towns to the global present, that the information nexus of our time is more a threat than a boon to economic vitality, and will require that "the state . . . must function . . . as the active patron and protector of the information nexus," for its own good (238). Perhaps the future of capitalism really does lie in China.

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#### COMPARATIVE/WORLD/TRANSNATIONAL

MARK SEDGWICK. *Western Sufism: From the Abbasids to the New Age*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017. Pp. ix, 350. \$35.00.

This erudite and informative book is a sequel to the author's *Against the Modern World: Traditionalism and the Secret Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century* (2004). Whereas the latter discusses the vicissitudes of "traditionalism," an amorphous religious-political and spiritual movement aimed at recovering the primeval "Oriental" belief and practice that the modern West has allegedly failed to appreciate and embrace, *Western Sufism* focuses on how Islamic asceticism-mysticism (Sufism), another "Oriental" tradition, has been received and practiced in the West from the fifteenth century to the present. The geographical scope of *Western Sufism* is broad. Its pro-

tagonists (both Muslim and non-Muslim) with various degrees of association with Sufism were highly mobile, especially in modern times. We find them journeying from India and Russia to Europe, and from Indonesia, the Middle East, and North Africa to North America. Mark Sedgwick masterfully shows how and why they resided permanently or temporarily in the West, contributing to the cultural and spiritual needs of their publics.

In this sense, argues Sedgwick, Sufism was and still is truly global in its outreach (249–250). His entire narrative rests on the idea of seminal transcultural transfers: from the Hellenic emanationism and mystical gnoseology of Plotinus and his commentators to medieval Muslim Baghdad and Iberia, to Jewish communities under Muslim rule, and then "from Arab Muslim and Jewish philosophy into Latin Christian philosophy" (253). Such momentous transfers continued throughout the early modern period, during which time Sufi ideas and imagery interacted intimately with preexistent trends, intellectual fashions, and controversies of the West, Martin Luther's favorable comparison of Sufis to Catholic monks in 1530 being the oft-quoted example (71).

Heavily influenced by internal European debates and often used as "ammunition" by disputants (79), Western perceptions of the Sufis ranged from positive (Sufis were compared to angels) to strictly negative (they were condemned as demonic and antinomian), even though their social and doctrinal "deviancy" occasionally resonated with the antidogmatic and anticlerical agendas of certain Western intellectuals (see chap. 4). As was the case with Islam generally, Sufism also served Westerners as a convenient forum for various religious, personal, and sociopolitical statements. Hence the attention that Sedgwick devotes to the highly complex and often elusive relationships between his protagonists' political views and their engagements with various aspects of Sufism (258–259).

The heyday for Western Sufism coincides with the loss, in the nineteenth century, of the Christian Church's monopoly on the intellectual and religious life of Westerners and the emergence, among some of them, of antidogmatic and anticlerical universalism. The early decades of the twentieth century witnessed the first initiations into Sufism of Westerners by Westerners (e.g., of René Guénon by Ivan Aguéli) and the establishment of first Sufi orders in Western countries (chaps. 8 and 10). It was the time when the Indian Sufi musician Inayat Khan triumphantly toured the West and Russia (chap. 9), and when the Russian Empire émigrés George Gurdjieff and P. D. Ouspensky introduced, under the guise of Sufism, new practices, ideas, and perceptions of reality. In particular, their teachings effectively replaced the age-old ideas—of the soul aspiring to reunite with the Divine—with the modern conceptions of consciousness and the possibility of its expansion through special exercises performed individually and collectively (176–181). Such ideas and practices soon won active and effective promoters, such as John G. Bennett (181–183), whereas Inayat Khan's universalist Sufism acquired a large, enthusiastic following in Europe, Russia, New York, and California (156–166). Building on two nineteenth-century movements, Tran-